

# ICHIBO

(STORY OF THE CHIPKO MOVEMENT)

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Ichibo enjoys poetry, hates Maths and would rather eat puris than idlis. Life is uneventful till Ichibo's new English teacher talks to her students about the Chipko movement.

Can Ichibo and her friends stop the felling of trees in the compound next to the school? Will the Headmistress carry out her threat to expel Ichibo? Will Ajith, the journalist, keep his word?

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## I

Ichibo woke up with a start. It was the first day of school after the summer holidays, and she was excited at the thought of going to a new class and meeting her old friends. She jumped out of bed, brushed her teeth, and entered the kitchen to ask her mother for a glass of milk. Ichibo's mother was surprised to see her daughter up so early.

“Good morning, Ichibo. You are early today!” said Ichibo's mother with a smile.

“Good morning,” mumbled Ichibo. She drank her milk quickly and rushed back to her bedroom. She went to her table and looked at all her new books which were covered with brown paper. How Ichibo loved her new books! Her mother and she had spent an hour the previous day covering them. Ichibo had enjoyed sticking the labels. The labels read “Suchitra Sreenivasan, Standard VI, Model High School.”

Suchitra's pet name was Ichibo. When she was young everyone had called her “Suchi baby.” As she couldn't say “Suchi baby,” she had turned it into Ichibo. The name had stuck and she was known to all her friends as Ichibo. Only the teachers at the school called her Suchitra.

Ichibo stuffed all the books into her school bag. As she had a shower, she thought with a shiver of excitement of all the friends she would be meeting. She was specially thinking of her gang of five. Among her four friends was Gayathri, who giggled at the least provocation. They called her the Giggler. Then there was Anita, whom they had first called Ani and later on the Bunny. Shakunthala became Shuck and then the Duck, and Shruti was known as the Shrew.

The mothers of this gang of five knew of and hated these names. They had chosen names for their daughters after a lot of careful thought and considered the names very special. To have them changed in this manner horrified them.

Ichibo realised with a start that she had been too long at her bath. She wiped herself and got into her crisply starched uniform. Her mother had to comb her hair which was very thick and very long. Ichibo's mother took great pride in combing out all the knots and making a thick, long plait.

Just as she was finishing her breakfast, the school bus honked. She grabbed her books, wished her mother "goodbye" and didn't wait to hear her mother say, "Have a good day." The bus took nearly half an hour to reach the school.

Chattering happily and excitedly, the children entered their old classroom and sat at their old desks. At the sound of the bell, each class was led to a higher class. Ichibo and the gang quickly occupied desks in the same row.

As soon as the class teacher arrived, she was greeted with both silence and surprise. "She's new," said Ani the Bunny.

"I -heard we'd have a new teacher," said Shruti the Shrew.

"I hope we will like her," said Ani the Bunny.

Gayathri the Giggler just giggled.

"Sh..." said Ichibo. She took to the new teacher at once. It was almost like love at first sight.

The teacher said, "I am your new teacher. You can call me Miss Sheela. I will get to know your names during the roll call."

Ichibo noticed that the new teacher looked at each one of them with great interest as she read their names out and they answered, "Present."

"I want you to write about 'Your First Day in School.' I will give you twenty minutes. I will read out the best essay. Try to make it interesting," said Miss Sheela.

Soon the whole class was at work. Ani the Bunny whispered that she didn't have a single idea.

Shuck the Duck started to write but without any interest. Gayathri the Giggler giggled softly as she wrote, although there was nothing to giggle about. Ichibo, however, loved essay writing. She seemed lost in deep thought for a few minutes. And then, although her ball-point pen went racing over the paper with great speed, it couldn't quite catch up with all she wanted to say.

Ichibo wrote about 'smells' connected with the first day in school — the smell of crisp, starched uniforms, the wonderful smell of new books, the clean odour of lime-washed walls and the smell of freshly polished shoes.

The class waited until Miss Sheela had gone through all the essays.

"The best essay," said Miss Sheela, "was written by Suchitra." The whole class clapped for Ichibo. Miss Sheela, the teacher, said, "That was really good, Suchitra. You do have imagination and you are a born writer." Suchitra received the essay and shyly said, "Thank you."

"Besides," joked Miss Sheela, "you do have a sense of smell."

All day Ichibo walked on air. She liked Miss Sheela. How lucky they were to have her as their class teacher! So unlike the Maths teacher, Mrs. Martin, whom they feared and hated.

Back home, Ichibo's mother asked her, "Had a nice day? What happened at school today?"

"Oh," said Ichibo. "We have a new teacher."

"And did you like her?" asked Ichibo's mother.

"She's okay," said Ichibo. "She complimented me on my sense of smell."

"Your sense of smell?" asked Ichibo's mother, wondering what her daughter meant.

"Yes, my sense of smell. Didn't I say sense of smell?" retorted Ichibo impatiently, as she went up to her room.

Ichibo's mother shook her head and didn't know quite what to make of it.

## II

It was a long bus ride to school. It took almost half an hour, but on Tuesdays Ichibo wished it would take longer. The first period on all Tuesdays was Mathematics. Mrs. Martin taught Mathematics to all the higher classes and she was uniformly feared and disliked.

The bus picked up some children on Church Road and was now heading towards the main shopping centre of the city. Ichibo knew all the shops. One that she could literally smell was "Hot Buns" where they sold mouth-watering cakes and eats. Another shop was "My Fair Lady," where her friends got their hair cut. Ichibo had never visited the place because she had very long hair and it was never cut. The school was on the other side of the town and the bus had to pass through the shopping centre. From here it was only a ten-minute drive.

The bus had stopped to pick up Ani the Bunny. Her house was only three stops away from the school. Ichibo just, smiled at her and was in no mood to talk. Tuesdays always depressed her. Maths was no way to start a day!

It was not that Ichibo was bad at Maths. But she was very careless and one cannot be good at Maths if one is careless. Adding up rows of figures bored her and her mind would wander to a line of a poem taught that day. Her answers would then go haywire. Besides, Mrs. Martin was not merely a harsh disciplinarian; she would often make fun of a girl in front of the whole class.

Mrs. Martin gave them ten sums to do from a Mathematics text; Ichibo finished the first five quickly enough. Mrs. Martin went round the classroom stopping at each desk and correcting the sums as and when they were finished by the students. The first five sums done by Ichibo were correct. Mrs. Martin went to the other side of the class. When Ichibo was doing the sixth, seventh, eighth and ninth sum, she thought about the new English teacher. "What a nice teacher Miss Sheela is! How intelligent! How interesting! Time in her class just flies and the bell seems to ring much too soon." Naturally the answers to sums No. 6, 7, 8 and 9 were wrong.

Mrs. Martin came to Ichibo's desk. "Wrong, wrong, wrong and WRONG," she said crossing out sums 6, 7, 8 and 9 with a red pencil. "How could you get an answer like 100 lakhs? It should be 10 lakhs. An extra zero makes a world of difference."

Ichibo stood up with her head bowed down.

"Take sum No. 7," said Mrs. Martin, "What should you do with the numbers 1178 and 92?"

Ichibo was silent but Mrs. Martin wanted an answer. What does one do with 1178 and 92, she wondered? Ichibo looked down at her notebook. She had subtracted. She quickly said, "Add."

"No," shouted Mrs. Martin.

"Multiply," said Ichibo brightly.

"No, No, No," thundered Mrs. Martin.

"Divide," said Ichibo in a low voice.

"I know that in Maths you can only add, subtract, divide and multiply, stupid!" said Mrs. Martin. "For each wrong answer you must do five more sums as homework."

Ichibo felt very hurt. She had been called "stupid" in front of the whole class. She hated Mrs. Martin with all her being. During lunch time the gang consoled her. Shuck the Duck, who was the best student in Maths, said, "Don't worry Ichibo. I'll work out all the sums and you can copy them. And don't forget to come home this evening and see my computer. The others are coming too."

That evening Ichibo went to the Duck's house. All her friends were there. She played for an hour or so. The computer games, even the number games, were fascinating and when it was time to go, Shakunthala's mother said, "Come whenever you want to, Suchitra, and play with the computer!"

Though the evening had passed off pleasantly, Ichibo was still feeling depressed. All through dinner she did not speak a word.

"What's the matter Ichibo?" asked her father.

"Am I a stupid girl, Appa?" asked Ichibo, close to tears.

"Of course not, my magpie robin," said Ichibo's father. He called her that because as a little child she used to chatter away all the time. "Who called you stupid?" he asked.

"Never mind who," she said and stumbled into her room blinded by tears.

Her mother wanted to follow Ichibo and find out what had happened. But her father advised her to leave Ichibo alone.

Ichibo got into bed and cried herself to sleep.

### III

Suchitra had copied the "Punishment Homework" of 25 sums from Shuck the Duck's notebook. Mrs. Martin had not forgotten. As soon as Mrs. Martin had read out the roll call, she said, "Suchitra, let me see your homework."

Ichibo handed her homework to Mrs. Martin. Satisfied that all the 25 sums had been done correctly, Mrs. Martin gave back the book and said, "That's better. You are not such a stupid girl after all."

Although this remark was meant to encourage Ichibo, she felt humiliated again. She took the book and went back to her desk.

The gang felt very bad for Suchitra. Ani the Bunny took a piece of paper and scribbled  
"If Mrs. Martin goes to Hell,  
Standard VI will ring the bell."

She folded the paper and passed it on to Gayathri who read it and giggled. Shruti the Shrew quickly took it from her and read it. At that moment, Mrs. Martin looked at her but Shruti stared back with a blank and innocent look. Shuck the Duck read it and smiled. The note was thrown to Amar. It was then passed on from boy to boy.

Mrs. Martin sensed that something was happening. She saw the suppressed smiles, the eyes shining with amusement and heard the muffled giggles. The class seemed to be sharing a joke. Was the joke against her?

Mrs. Martin marched up the aisle and snatched the paper from Abhay's hand. She went to her desk and tried, to piece together what was written. She read slowly and loudly "Standard VI will ring the bell" but the rest of the paper was so badly torn that she could not make head or tail of it.

"Who will ring the bell?" she shouted across to the boys. Gayathri the Giggler started to giggle but controlled herself when Mrs. Martin stared at her. "What bell?" Mrs. Martin persisted in asking.

The class was silent. All the boys and girls appeared to concentrate on their books. Mrs. Martin, who did not understand what had happened, had to let it go.

At lunch the girls discussed Mrs. Martin.

"Why is she rude?" asked Gayathri the Giggler.

"Even if I get one sum wrong, she scolds me and..."

But before Ani the Bunny could finish her sentence the others said in chorus, "She gives you five more sums for homework."

"She doesn't have a single word of encouragement for us," said Shuck the Duck.

"She is not at all like Miss Sheela," said Ichibo. "Miss Sheela is a pet."

"She makes you want to work for her."

"We will have Mrs. Martin for the next three years," said Ani the Bunny.

"She calls me stupid and makes me feel stupid," said Ichibo morosely.

As she said this, the school peon came to Ani the Bunny. "The headmistress wants to see you," he said and left.

Ani the Bunny started to tremble with fear. "Do you think the Headmistress knows that I wrote that note?"

"How could she?" said Ichibo. "And even if she does, Mrs. Martin did not see the first line asking her to go to Hell."

"All the same, I'm scared," said Ani the Bunny and there were tears in her eyes.

"I'll come along with you," said Ichibo. She had decided to say that it was she who had written the note. After all the note did echo her feelings. And she would face the consequences no matter how bad they were.

Ani the Bunny timidly knocked on the door of the Headmistress' room.

"Come in," said the Headmistress. Two frightened little girls entered the room.

"Oh, I want you to do something for me, Anita," said the Headmistress. "Mrs. Martin stays near your house. She left early today saying her husband is not well. Will you kindly give her these books this evening?"

The two girls heaved a sigh of relief. They ran back to their friends skipping with joy.

"What happened?" asked Shruti the Shrew.

"It had nothing to do with the note. She wants us to go to Mrs. Martin's house and give her these books," said Ani the Bunny.

"I'll come along with you," said Ichibo. She was still not completely sure that the visit to Mrs. Martin was not connected with the note.

#### IV

After school was over, Ani the Bunny and Ichibo took the school bus. Anita got down at the stop near her house. Ichibo's house was another five stops away as usual, but Ichibo got down too. She was accompanying Anita to Mrs. Martin's house to deliver the books given by the Headmistress.

Ani the Bunny and Ichibo stood nervously outside the door. They rang the bell. Mrs. Martin came to the door.

"Oh you," she said. "Come. Come in."

She asked them to sit down. The room was very small. It served as a drawing room and a dining room. They politely took their seats.

"And what brings you here?" said Mrs. Martin.

The Headmistress asked us to give you these books," said Ani the Bunny.

Just then a girl of about 15 years entered the room. "Oh, this is my daughter, Maria," said Mrs. Martin. The girl smiled at Ani the Bunny and Ichibo. Mrs. Martin made some signs to her and she left the room.

"Maria was born deaf," said Mrs. Martin and sighed. "Though I'm a teacher, I couldn't send her to a deaf and dumb school. My husband has been ill for the past few years and I have to work. And Maria helps look after Robin."

Robin was her six-year old son. He came skipping into the room grinned at Ani the Bunny and Ichibo and skipped out.

Maria came in with a tray of tea and biscuits. "Maria is a good girl," said Mrs. Martin. "I don't know what I would have done without her," said Mrs. Martin as she put an affectionate arm around Maria, who snuggled up to her.

Ichibo was surprised. Here was a different Mrs. Martin. Not the haughty, proud, ill-tempered teacher, but a woman with many problems. "Poor Mrs. Martin," Ichibo thought. "What wicked girls we have been!"

"I feel awful that Maria has to cope with all this work. But I have to earn my living. My husband has not had a job for the past five years. And I am the sole breadwinner."

All the time she was talking, she held' Maria close to her and looked upon her with great love.

Mrs. Martin kept on talking. "I know I am very strict," she said, "But you will thank me the day your Standard X results are out."

The two girls listened to Mrs. Martin not knowing what to say. They ate the biscuits and drank the tea. Maria took away the cups and saucers.

It was time to go. "Thanks for bringing the books, Anita and Suchitra," said Mrs. Martin.

"Anita is, of course, very good at Maths. But you are a very bright girl, Suchitra. You could do well in Maths if you only cared to."

"Bright, Mrs. Martin?" asked Ichibo.

"You stupid goose, of course, you are a bright girl!" Mrs. Martin exclaimed as she saw them to the door.

After they, left the house, Anita said, "She called you stupid and bright at the same time. Funny, isn't it?"

"No, it's not," said Ichibo. Ani the Bunny looked at Ichibo in surprise.

"What's happened to you?" she asked.

"Nothing," said Ichibo. "Only don't say anything nasty ever again about Mrs. Martin."

## V

Everyone looked forward to the Geography classes. Mrs. Shantha could never control the class and all the children did exactly what they liked during her period. She could never scold them no matter how naughty they were. Even when she tried to be strict she would end up laughing at what they had done. Besides, she was fond of practical demonstrations. And it was easy for the class to have fun then. Today was one such day and Mrs. Shantha had brought a basin of water and a block of ice to class. The class watched Mrs. Shantha place the basin of water on the table and put the block of ice in it.

Ichibo was munching on a gooseberry. Ani the Bunny had brought a small bag of them to class. Two pieces of paper contained salt and chilly powder. The girls dared not eat gooseberries in any other class. The trick was to hold the geography book high enough while you popped a gooseberry into your mouth. The gooseberries were passed silently and swiftly round the class. Soon everyone was munching on gooseberries.

"Ice in a basin of water," giggled Gayathri. "What on earth is she going to teach us!"

As if in answer to her question, Mrs. Shantha said, "Today's lesson is on the Artic Circle and icebergs." As Mrs. Shantha glanced around the class, she suspected that, the girls were eating something.

“Have any of you seen snow?” asked Mrs. Shantha.

No one answered. No one could with a gooseberry in the mouth. “You, Suchitra, have you seen snow?”

Ichibo nodded vigorously.

Gayathri the Giggler giggled.

“Quiet,” said Mrs. Shantha.

“I have,” said Amar from the other side of the classroom trying to help Ichibo.

“I didn’t ask you,” said Mrs. Shantha.

Ichibo quickly put her hand to her mouth and in a flash of a second the gooseberry was in her hand.

“I have, Mrs. Shantha,” said Ichibo.

“Where?” asked Mrs. Shantha.

“In Shimla. Last winter, I had gone there for my birthday,” said Ichibo.

“I have seen snow too,” said Gayathri the Giggler.

“So have I,” said Ani the Bunny.

“We went to Kulu in May. It was my birthday,” said Shruti the Shrew.

“Mine is in February,” said Shuck the Duck.

“When is yours, Mrs. Shantha?” asked Amar.

The questions came thick and fast. Mrs. Shantha said, “Quiet, quiet. Are we talking of birthdays or of snow?” she asked the class.

“Birthdays, Mrs. Shantha,” answered the whole class in chorus. Mrs. Shantha quickly glanced outside to see whether anyone had heard what was going on in the classroom.

The boys in the class were restless. Some of them were throwing paper arrows at each other. Some were playing with marbles on the desk. A steady hum of thirty voices could be heard.

“Quiet, quiet please,” said Mrs. Shantha. The noise subsided a little. “QUIET!” shouted Mrs. Shantha. The noise died down.

To keep the class silent and busy she asked the class to colour the Arctic region on a map. Meanwhile the block of ice had melted in the basin of water. She had meant to teach them all about icebergs and to point out to them that a large portion of ice remained under water when it floated. The bell rang. Mrs. Shantha sighed. It would be difficult to finish the geography syllabus. She could never manage to control this class.

At the lunch interval the gang sat together under a tree. They always shared whatever they had brought and hardly ever ate what their mothers sent.

When Ichibo opened her lunch box she was disappointed. Idris as usual. Ani the Bunny had puris, and peas with paneer. Ichibo willingly swapped her lunch. She loved paneer and peas. Idris and dosas and lime rice were what her mother packed for her on most days. She enjoyed her lunch immensely.

Back home, her mother asked her the usual question, “How was school today?”

Ichibo loved her school but she said "Oh, boring as usual." Then she suddenly brightened up and said, "I had a fantastic lunch, Amma, paneer and peas and puris."

"Paneer, peas, puris!" exclaimed Ichibo's mother. "I packed idlis today. Oh Ichibo, you must have eaten someone else's lunch instead of yours. The lunch boxes must have looked alike," said Ichibo's mother.

But Ichibo merely smiled mysteriously.

## VI

It was Saturday, the 13th of December, and Ichibo woke up that morning with a feeling of excitement. It was a very special day, her birthday. She got dressed and went to the living room.

"Many happy returns, Ichibo," said her mother.

"Many happy returns, my little magpie robin," said Ichibo's father. "Come and see your gift. It's too big to bring into the house. So I've left it outside."

Ichibo wondered what it was. The best gifts were those that came as a surprise. Ichibo's parents never told her what they were going to give her for her birthday. They never even asked her what she wanted most. But it was really surprising how they managed to give Ichibo exactly what she wanted.

Outside in the garden stood a brand new bike! She had learnt to cycle barely a month ago on Amar's bike. It had been difficult because Amar had a very heavy, old bike. But Ichibo, being somewhat of a tomboy, had learnt to ride it. Ichibo's new bike was red in colour and shone and glistened in the sun.

"Thank you Appa, thank you Amma," shouted Ichibo. Then she got onto the bike and was off.

"Take care," shouted her parents after her.

When she came back all flushed with the excitement of owning a bicycle, her favourite dish was on the breakfast table. It was masala dosa. Her mother knew how to make them crisp and golden brown. She filled them with peas and potatoes and cashew nuts and topped them with dollops of butter. They sat down to breakfast.

"How many friends have you invited for the party today, Ichibo?" asked her mother.

"Oh, about 10 to 15," said Ichibo vaguely.

Ichibo's mother was busy in the kitchen the whole day. All the snacks had to be made at home. The dining room had to be decorated. Ichibo did not help her mother. She felt it was her birthday and the party was for her. So why should she help? Ichibo went upto her room and spent the morning reading.

In the afternoon as Ichibo was about to leave the house, she said, "I'll be back well before the party." Ichibo's mother thought that she wanted to go and play with Amar as she usually did on holidays. Instead Ichibo caught a bus and went straight to "My Fair Lady."

"I want you to cut my hair short," said Ichibo to the attendant.

“You have such beautiful, thick, jet black hair. Are you sure you want it cut?” asked the attendant.

“Quite sure,” said Ichibo.

“What length would you like it,” she asked.

“Up to my shoulder, no, even shorter.”

Snip, snip, went the scissors and Ichibo’s waist-length hair fell to the ground to be swept away and put into the dustbin. How proudly had Ichibo’s mother looked after her hair, combing and brushing it, massaging the scalp with oil and drying the hair gently after washing it! All those years of care lay in a heap on the floor. It took all of twenty minutes before the hair-dresser was satisfied with her work. Ichibo looked shyly at her face in the mirror and she liked what she saw.

As she neared home, she grew a little worried. What would her mother say? Her heart beat faster as she nervously called out, “Amma, I’m back.”

Ichibo’s mother was stunned. “What... What...you’ve cut your hair!”

“Yes, Amma, don’t you like my hair style?” she asked.

“Ichibo, why didn’t you ask me before cutting it?” said Ichibo’s mother.

“You wouldn’t have agreed, would you, Amma?” said Ichibo.

“Of course, I wouldn’t have. You had such beautiful long hair. Anyone can have short hair Ichibo, but not everyone can have long hair.”

“Oh Amma, I wanted to cut my hair so much. If I had asked you, you would have said no and then I could never have done it. Please, let this be my second birthday gift.”

“What more can I say now, Ichibo? You’ve already cut your hair. What’s the use?”

Ichibo went up to her mother and hugged and kissed her. She knew her mother was terribly upset.

“I hope your father won’t mind,” said Ichibo’s mother.

“Appa won’t be angry with me. I can easily handle him,” said Ichibo.

Her friends arrived at 4.30 p.m. though the party was supposed to start at 5 p.m. Ichibo was just about ready. When her friends saw her, they squealed in delight.

“You look fantastic,” said Ani the Bunny.

“It suits you,” said Shruti the Shrew.

“Where did you get it done?” asked Gayathri the Giggler.

Ichibo’s mother noticed that her daughter’s friends did not regret Ichibo’s cutting her long hair. They seemed to think that it was a very good thing.

Amar went up to Ichibo and whispered, “It’s fab! You look great.”

By five o’clock all the children invited had arrived. Ichibo’s mother noticed with dismay that there were thirty five children in all. Ichibo had told her that there would be only 10 or 15. It was just like Ichibo. Luckily she had made three times the quantity of ladus, potato chips, idlis, dahi vadas and sandwiches that she thought they’d eat.

Ichibo's father arrived at 6, but he couldn't spot Ichibo. Ichibo, with her short haircut, looked like all the other girls. Ichibo's mother took him aside and told him what had happened. She begged him not to scold Ichibo.

"Ichibo hated her long hair. It was difficult to look after, clean and dry. And she looked so much older than her age. It was to satisfy my ego that I made her grow her hair to the waist. I realise that now. She must have longed to look like her friends."

"Whatever you say, it is a pity," said Ichibo's father.

"It is. From our point of view," said Ichibo's mother.

The cake was cut and games were played. Everyone had a wonderful time. Each child was given a gift and everyone went home tired but happy.

Ichibo now had to face her father. What would he say about her hair style? The best form of defence was attack. So she went up to him and said, "How do you like my hair style?"

Ichibo's father said, "It's...it's...good. You look younger and just like your friends."

Alone with her mother, Ichibo said, "Appa was not displeased about my cutting my hair short. I told you I could handle him."

Little did Ichibo know that it was her mother's 'handling' of her father that had helped.

## VII

"What do you like most about the poem *The Highway Man*?" asked Miss Sheela.

The whole class was silent. Most of them liked the poem very much but did not know why. Ichibo thought she did. She was, however, too shy to stand up and answer the question. She was shy only in Miss Sheela's class. She adored her so much that she didn't want to make an ass of herself in front of her.

"Anita, tell me why you like the poem," said Miss Sheela.

Anita whose skill lay in making up rhymes on the spur of the moment said:

"I do like the poem well, The reason why I cannot tell."

The whole class burst into laughter. The boys clapped. Miss Sheela also laughed. She could always appreciate a joke. Other teachers would have thought that Anita was being cheeky. It took sometime for the class to settle down after this.

Miss Sheela then looked around the class and spotted Ichibo.

"Suchitra, could you tell me why you liked the poem," she said.

"I like the poem because it has an exciting story, it's a love story. The descriptions are superb. Like 'the road was a ribbon of moonlight over the purple moor'. Or 'the moon was a ghostly galleon tos't upon cloudy seas'."

"You seem to know the whole poem by heart," said Miss Sheela.

"I do. The lilies are easy to remember because of their rhythm," said Ichibo. And she continued to recite:

“Trot trot in the frosty silence  
Trot trot in the echoing night  
Nearer he came and nearer”

As Ichibo recited the lines the boys in the class started beating a tattoo on the desks. As she went on, it became louder and louder and Miss Sheela was about to say, “Not so loud,” when the Headmistress entered the class. A girl followed her.

“Oh, I see you are enjoying the poem,” said the Headmistress. “I want to introduce you to Samyuktha your new classmate. She has come from a boarding school at Ooty.”

Miss Sheela smiled at Samyuktha and led her to a place near Ichibo. The Headmistress left and the poetry class was resumed. Samyuktha smiled at Ichibo who barely returned the smile.

There is something about a new student joining midterm that makes it hard for the others to make friends with her. She was new, she was different. Once a gang is formed, it is very difficult for anyone to break in and join it. Ichibo and her gang were very jealous and protective about their friendship.

During the lunch interval Samyuktha stood alone under a tree. There was a small packet in her hand and she was munching something with no interest. Suddenly the gang saw her approaching them.

“Here,” said Samyuktha to Ichibo and thrust a small packet into her hands and ran away. Ichibo was so surprised that she did not have the time either to refuse the gift or to thank Samyuktha.

It was a packet of glucose biscuits.

“Ugh,” said Ani the Bunny. “Who wants biscuits?”

“If they were cream biscuits, I wouldn’t have minded,” said Shruti the Shrew.

“Give them back to her,” said Gayathri the Giggler not meaning to be cruel really. She thought it a joke.

Ichibo hated biscuits. She felt bad for Samyuktha, so she ate one, then another and another. She couldn’t finish the fourth so she quietly threw it behind a bush hoping that no one had seen her.

For the rest of the week the same thing happened. Samyuktha would thrust a packet of biscuits into Ichibo’s hands and run away.

“She must believe that biscuits will buy your friendship, Ichibo,” said Gayathri the Giggler.

Ichibo didn’t like what she said. But it was true. Samyuktha was always with her. As soon as the bell rang and school was over, she would follow her up to the bus. If Ichibo went to the library, Samyuktha went too. And Samyuktha watched Ichibo all the time. Ichibo didn’t like this either. Samyuktha had large expressive eyes and an intelligent face, though one couldn’t really call her pretty. When Samyuktha looked at Ichibo with those large eyes, Ichibo used to feel uneasy.

“She clings to me,” complained Ichibo. “I don’t like it. What am I to do?”

“Tell her that if she brings you chocolates instead, you wouldn’t mind,” said Ani the Bunny. Anita loved chocolates and would do anything for them.

When school was over and Ichibo was about to board the bus, Samyuktha came to her and said, “I want you to come home tomorrow evening after school. Tell your parents you will be late. I’ll drop you back.”

Ichibo didn’t know what to say. She was not sure whether she wanted to go. To refuse would be rude. So she said, “All right, I’ll come.”

Samyuktha smiled happily and ran up to the car that was waiting for her. The driver opened the door, took her school bag, shut the door. After Samyuktha got into the car, he started the car and drove away.

The next day, at lunch, Ichibo told the gang that she was spending the evening with Samyuktha. “She has promised to drop me home,” said Ichibo. Just then Samyuktha came with a packet. But this time it contained chocolates — five in all — one for each of them.

“Oh, how wonderful,” said Ani the Bunny. “Did you tell her we loved chocolates?”

“No,” said Ichibo.

“Then how did she guess we loved chocolates?” asked Ani the Bunny.

“Don’t be a fool, Ani,” said Ichibo. “Is there anyone you know who doesn’t like chocolates!”

“You are right. I don’t,” said Ani the Bunny, her mouth full of chocolate. The gang felt a little more sympathetically disposed towards the new girl.

## VIII

Ichibo told her mother that she would be late from school as she was going home with her new friend, Samyuktha.

“She will drop me back in the evening,” said Ichibo.

“I hear Samyuktha’s father is a doctor and that her mother comes from a rich family. They own coffee estates.”

“I don’t know anything about her parents,” said Ichibo.

As soon as the car went down the drive-way and stopped at the porch of Samyuktha’s house, Ichibo realised that what her mother had said was true — they were rich but this did not impress or bother her. In front of the house was a well-laid garden.

Samyuktha introduced Ichibo to her mother, “This is Ichibo,” she said, “the girl I spoke to you about.”

“What’s your real name, Ichibo?” asked Samyuktha’s mother.

“Suchitra,” said Ichibo.

“What a lovely name,” said Samyuktha’s mother. “But why do they call you Ichibo?”

“It’s just a pet name,” said Ichibo.

Samyuktha was impatiently waiting to have Ichibo all to herself. She took Ichibo to her room. There was a big shelf full of story books. There were better books here than in the school library. Ichibo was a voracious reader. She could finish a book a day.

“Could I take a few books home to read? I will return them carefully,” promised Ichibo.

“Of course. Take what you like, as many of them as you want,” said Samyuktha.

Ichibo carefully selected six books and kept them aside to take home.

Samyuktha’s room was full of things. She had packets of felt pens, crayons, coloured pencils, oil paints. Her toys included educational toys, jig-saw puzzles, memory games, embroidery kits. Samyuktha also showed Ichibo her costume jewellery — bangles of every colour, earrings and chains to match. Ichibo was, however, not interested in costume jewellery or in the numerous pretty dolls that were arranged on another shelf.

Samyuktha’s mother then told them that tea was ready. The cook brought them hot samosas.

On the table there was a delicious chocolate cake. And to top it all there was ice-cream with figs and dates. Ichibo took a second helping of everything. Samyuktha did not seem interested in food.

“She hardly eats,” said Samyuktha’s mother. “Today she has eaten something because of you. She is a lonely child.”

Ichibo wondered how one could not eat with all those delicious snacks going around and how could one be lonely with so many toys and books.

“You must come again,” said Samyuktha’s mother. “And bring your friends. They are also welcome.”

Ichibo imagined the gang at Samyuktha’s place. What a nice time they would have!

The gang was invited to spend the whole of Saturday at Samyuktha’s house. They had a wonderful time. They played games, sang songs, ran about in the garden. They had a sumptuous lunch and in the afternoon they started on the largest jig-saw puzzle. This one had 500 pieces but together they solved it. And when the last piece was put into place, they felt a sense of triumph.

“Tea is ready,” called Samyuktha’s mother.

It was a well-laid table. There were rasgollas, plum cake, hot potato bondas and, of course, ice-cream. The gang did full justice to the food laid out for them.

“Oh, I’m stuffed,” said Ani the Bunny.

“I’ve never eaten so much in my life,” said Gayathri the Giggler.

“I feel like a python,” said Shruti the Shrew.

“I won’t be able to eat for a week,” said Ichibo.

“You must come again,” said Samyuktha’s mother. “Samyuktha is an only child and when you all come, the house is full of laughter.”

“Of course, we will,” said Ani the Bunny.

That night Ichibo's mother asked her whether she had enjoyed the day at Samyuktha's house.

"Oh, we had a whale of a time, Amma. The food was fantastic. She has lots of books which I'm allowed to borrow, lots of games, lots of everything. Samyuktha's mother has invited us again next Saturday."

"Are all of you going there again?" asked Ichibo's mother.

"Of course we are," said Ichibo. "I like Samyuktha. She's nice. Poor little rich girl."

"She's a rich girl all right. But why poor?" asked Ichibo's mother.

"Oh, you won't understand the contradiction," said Ichibo.

## IX

After the wonderful Saturday that the gang had spent at Samyuktha's house, Samyuktha pulled out a large lunch box and joined them for lunch.

"Here," she said, "some of this is for you. You seemed to love the samosas made at home."

"I was afraid you had brought biscuits for us," said Gayathri and giggled uncontrollably.

"Biscuits are a bore but samosas we adore," said Shruti the Shrew,

"Actually, we used to make fun of you for giving Ichibo a packet of biscuits everyday," said Shuck the Duck. "Biscuits...Ugh."

"I hated having lunch alone. So I used to make do with biscuits," said Samyuktha.

The gang shared whatever they had brought from home. Ichibo noted with surprise that Samyuktha, who had been called a poor eater, was now eating with relish. "Her mother would love to see this," Ichibo thought.

"What will you bring us for lunch tomorrow? Sam...Samyu... Samyuktha is such a long name," said Ani the Bunny. "Let's see if we can't shorten it. We'll call you...Sum the Dum."

With this name Samyuktha was completely accepted by the gang. She took part in their jokes and shared their secrets. Samyuktha liked all the members of the gang but her liking for Ichibo was very special.

After lunch they went to class and eagerly waited for Miss Sheela to read out poetry. But Miss Sheela didn't open her poetry book. Instead she said, "Today is Vanamhotsava Day and instead of reading out poetry, I would like to talk to you about trees."

The class sat back and relaxed. There was apparently to be no teaching this period.

"Why do we celebrate Vanamhotsava Day?" asked Miss Sheela.

There was no answer.

"We celebrate it so that people realise the importance of trees and grow to love and take care of them. When we were ruled by the British, they cut down many, many trees in our forests to make way for tea and coffee estates and for timber. When we were free and the British went away, did we stop cutting down trees?" asked Miss Sheela.

“No,” chorused the class because that was the obvious answer.

“The tribals worshipped trees because they knew the value of trees. Have you heard of the Chipko movement?” asked Miss Sheela.

“No, Miss Sheela. Do tell us,” said Ani the Bunny.

Ichibo listened spell-bound. She liked the idea of how the tribal women in Garhwal had hugged the trees to save them. As she listened to Miss Sheela, Ichibo admired her for the way she spoke, the way she walked and the way she stood. Miss Sheela wore only handloom sarees, partly because it would benefit the weavers and partly because most of them were traditional and beautiful. Ichibo had grown to dislike the polyester sarees worn by the other teachers.

Miss Sheela told the class that India had the largest variety of trees in the world. She told them about the magnificent banyan tree and all about the peepul trees which birds loved for the little ripe fruit.

“Didn’t Buddha attain enlightenment under the banyan tree?” asked Ichibo suddenly.

“Yes, that’s right. The banyan and the peepul live for hundreds of years. The banyan and peepul in the compound next to the school must have been planted long, long ago.”

“That means, the peepul and banyan trees in the next compound must have been planted even before my great-grandmother was born!” Ichibo said. “What a lot of events those trees must have silently witnessed, what changes in the world!” She had never thought before of the beauty or of the longevity of trees.

Miss Sheela then told the class about the danger of disappearing forests and how it would affect the world.

“That’s why we celebrate Vanamhotsava Day. And before we finish, I would like to read out a poem by an American poet :

I think that I shall never see

A poem as lovely as a tree...”

Ichibo was again lost in thought. One part of her heard the poem, the other part thought about how lucky she was to have Miss Sheela as her teacher. She looked forward to school everyday only because of Miss Sheela. Suddenly she heard Miss Sheela say :

“Poems are written by fools like you and me

But only God can make a tree.”

The poem ended, Miss Sheela shut the book. Just then the bell rang.

At lunch time, Ichibo said to the gang, “Don’t you think that Miss Sheela is a wonderful teacher!”

“Come, Ichibo, all of us think that you have a crush on her,” said Ani the Bunny.

“We do,” said Gayathri the Giggler.

“You don’t even exchange jokes with us in her class anymore,” said Shuck the Duck. “You are all attention in Miss Sheela’s class. You are not like that in the other classes.”

“I only admire her,” said Ichibo.

“You have a crush on her,” said the gang in one voice. Only Samyuktha didn’t tease her although she felt the gang was right.

Ichibo didn’t say anything. She felt hot and flustered as the blood rushed to her face. So what if she had a crush on Miss Sheela? Miss Sheela was admired by all.

When she got home Ichibo’s mother asked her as usual, “And so what’s new at school today!”

“Oh, we celebrated Vanamhotsava day and planted trees In the school compound.”

“What else did you do?”

“Miss Sheela read a poem. By the way, did you know that poems are made by fools like you and me?” asked Ichibo.

“Fools like you and me?” repeated Ichibo’s mother bewildered, as Ichibo walked away to her room.

## X

After a quick lunch, the gang usually made a beeline for the swings. The small, low, swings on one side were for the younger children. The bigger ones were for Standard IV and upwards.

Ichibo loved the swings. Once she was on them, it was difficult to get her off. So the gang decided that each of them could swing only fifty times. Ichibo sat on one of the swings and her friends pushed it from behind. With each push she went higher and higher till she could look down into the compound next to the school.

It was a compound full of trees. No one seemed to own it. Sometimes from her classroom, Ichibo used to see a flight of parrots coming to roost on the trees. As she looked over the compound wall a strange sight met her eyes. One man was measuring the trees round the girth and another man was taking down the measurements. Ichibo decided to investigate.

She got off the swing. She left the school and entered the compound.

“What are you doing?” she asked the man. His measuring tape was enclosed in a circular box.

“I’m measuring the girth of the trees,” said the man.

“Why?” she asked.

“Trees are sold by girth and height and the height of standing trees one can only guess.”

“Who is selling the trees?” asked Ichibo.

“I don’t know. We were only asked to measure these so that a price can be fixed. We will then come back on Saturday to cut them down, if the price is reasonable.”

“But why cut the trees down?” asked Ichibo in despair.

“You can’t build unless you cut the trees, can you?” said the man.

Just then the bell rang and although Ichibo ran as fast as she could, she was the last to enter the class. She was breathless.

“Where did you go?” whispered Ani the Bunny.

“You disappeared suddenly,” said Shruti the Shrew.

Ichibo couldn’t answer them. She was still panting. “I’ll tell you later,” she gasped.

It was the Maths class and Mrs. Martin was demonstrating H. C.M. and L.C.M. sums on the board. Ichibo couldn’t concentrate. She would learn how to do these sums from her father, she thought. Her mind was on the trees. The peepul, the banyan and the neem would all be cut down. On Saturday the man had said. This must be prevented. But how? How could one prevent the rightful owner from cutting down his own trees? There was no law against it. But she must, she simply had to prevent them from cutting down those trees. And she decided that she would.

After the last period was over, she called her friends together and told them that they would have to do something to stop the tree felling that was scheduled for Saturday.

“But how can we?” asked Ani the Bunny.

“The trees belong to the owner, whoever he is,” said Shruti the Shrew.

“Whatever shall we do?” said Gayatri.

“I know what,” said Ichibo. “We’ll do what the tribals did. We will hug the trees.”

The other four looked at her in surprise.

“I’ll get Amar to organise the boys in our class. I know him well. We should be there by 10 am on Saturday.”

“But we have no school on Saturday,” protested Gayatri.

“We could tell our parents that there are special classes and that it’s a working day for us,” said Ichibo.

The gang was very excited and all of them promised to do their best. Each of them would get at least three volunteers and Ichibo said that Amar was sure to recruit the boys in their class. Usually the boys and girls ignored each other in class as well as outside. And yet a strong bond existed between them when it was a question of mischief in class or of adventure outside.

That evening Ichibo went to Amar’s house. She told Amar about the trees to be chopped down in the compound next to the school.

“But what shall we do?” asked Amar. “We’ll protect the trees by hugging them. Like in the story Miss Sheela told us — the Chipko movement.”

“But we are kids. And those men are sure to be rude and chase us away.”

“It doesn’t matter who wins or loses,” said Ichibo. “We would have recorded our protest.”

Amar promised to get at least fifteen boys to come on Saturday and help Ichibo,

On Saturday morning, thirty excited and eager children had collected in the compound next to the school. Two woodcutters and another man, presumably a contractor, arrived at about 11 a.m. The wood-cutters took off their shirts and hung them on a nearby bush. They wondered what the children were doing in the compound. They looked around and selected the first tree. As soon as this happened, Ichibo cried out, “Come on everybody. Let’s save the tree.” The children joined hands and encircled the tree.

“Wait a minute. What are you doing?” asked the contractor.

Ichibo stepped forward, arms akimbo and answered, “We are saving the earth!”

“What?” said the man.

“We are not going to allow you to cut down any of the trees,” said Amar.

The contractor was taken aback at first, but then he got angry.

“Don’t listen to them,” he ordered the woodcutters. “Start your work at once.”

“But how can we, Sir? We can’t chop the tree down with these children standing around it,” said one woodcutter.

“You can push them aside, can’t you?” shouted the contractor.

“That’s not our job, Sir. You push them,” said one of the woodcutters. The two woodcutters were enjoying themselves. Whether they worked or not they would be paid for the day.

The contractor started to abuse and shout at the children. Soon a crowd collected. The contractor explained to the people in the crowd that the trees had to be cut and that the children were preventing the woodcutters from doing so.

A man in the crowd asked, “But why are they preventing you from cutting down the trees?”

“Some nonsense about saving the earth,” he muttered. He screamed at the children, “Get off the land, will you? Get off or I’ll beat you till your bones are broken.”

The children did not move although they were terrified.

“I’ll call the police,” the contractor screamed. “I’ll see that all of you are sent to the lock-up. Run away or I’ll really call the police.”

Just then a young man who happened to pass that way and heard what was happening took out his camera and began taking pictures.

“You, what are you doing?” screamed the contractor.

“Nothing. Taking photographs,” said the man.

“How dare you! Here give me your camera!”

“Certainly not,” said the man.

The crowd watched all this with great amusement. The contractor said to the woodcutters, “Let’s go. I’ll report this to the owner of the land.”

Ichibo and the rest of the children stayed on. They shared the lunch which they had brought. Then they played games. Some of the boys climbed the trees. The contractor didn’t come back. Ichibo wondered what had happened. She had saved the trees for the present. She would have to think about a plan of action to save them forever.

When she went home, her mother asked her, “And what did you learn in your special class today?”

“All about trees,” said Ichibo.

“All about trees?” asked Ichibo’s mother. “Yes, about trees and how to save them.”

Ichibo's mother wondered how trees could be saved, "You can grow trees, Ichibo. But how can you 'save' them?" she asked.

"You can both grow them and save them," said Ichibo as she walked away to her room.

Ichibo's mother was quite used to cryptic answers, 'half replies and a general lack of communication. "its part of her growing up and nothing more," she consoled herself.

That night, Ichibo lay in bed thinking over the day's events. They had won but she was sure that it was only a temporary victory. There was more to come. She was quite sure that she would be able to think of a way out. What she didn't realise at that time was that there was a lot more trouble in store for her.

## XI

Ichibo was restless all Sunday. She wondered whether the contractor had got his men to cut down the trees. Nobody worked on a Sunday and she was hoping the trees were safe from the axe. Over the weekend she had thought of a plan. On Monday morning she was ready for school earlier than usual.

Ichibo's mother looked at her in surprise. "You're ready so early," she said.

Ichibo said nothing. Her mother thought that she was preoccupied with school problems and left it at that. Ichibo wished her mother goodbye. "Has the bus come?" asked Ichibo's mother.

"It has," said Ichibo, rushing out. The bus driver blew the horn and waited for a few seconds, and then he drove away. Ichibo did not board the bus. She had stood a little away from the stop and no one had seen her.

"Why hasn't Ichibo come?" asked Ani the Bunny.

"I don't know," said Gayatri the Giggler.

"I wonder whether she's ill," said Shruti the Shrew,

They all turned to Amar to find out what had happened to Ichibo. Amar, whose house was next to Ichibo's, shrugged his shoulders to indicate that he did not know.

Miss Sheela entered the classroom, took the roll call and marked Ichibo 'absent'. "That's a pity," she said. "We are going to read some poems by Tagore."

The next period was the Maths period. Mrs. Martin was going to teach them a new chapter -Time and Distance. She ran her eyes across the classroom and noticed that Ichibo was absent. Soon the class was busy doing time and distance sums. Suddenly everyone heard a small weak voice say, "Please may I come in?" The whole class looked up and was astonished. It was Ichibo. Where had she gone? Why was she late? To be late to school by even two minutes was bad. But to be late by an hour was unthinkable.

"Why are you late, Suchitra?" asked Mrs. Martin kindly.

Suchitra was silent.

"Did you attend the 1st period?" she asked.

"No," said Ichibo.

“Then, why are you late?”

Again Ichibo did not answer.

“If you don’t tell me, I’m afraid I’ll have to send you to the Headmistress,” said Mrs. Martin.

There was no answer. Ichibo stood silently with her head bowed down.

“You may leave, Suchitra, and tell the Headmistress why you are late,” said Mrs. Martin, annoyed.

“Yes, Mrs. Martin,” said Ichibo and left the class.

Ichibo’s friends couldn’t concentrate on their work. What would the Headmistress do? They hoped Ichibo had a reasonable excuse for being so late.

Ichibo made her way slowly to the Headmistress’s room. Her heart was pounding with fear. She had thought that she would be able to reach school during Miss Sheela’s class. Miss Sheela wouldn’t have made such a fuss about her being late. But, unfortunately, she had been delayed and was now in trouble.

Ichibo knocked at the door.

“Come in,” said the Headmistress.

Ichibo entered and stood with head bowed down.

“Well?” said the Headmistress.

“Mrs. Martin asked me to report to you. I was late to school this morning,” said Ichibo.

“Why were you late?” asked the Headmistress kindly. Ichibo did not reply.

“What happened? Why were you late?” repeated the Headmistress impatiently.

“I...I couldn’t get to school on time,” said Ichibo.

“That’s no answer to my question,” said the Headmistress. “Why were you late to school?”

Silence. Ichibo didn’t know what to say. She kept her head bowed. She couldn’t look the Headmistress in the face.

“Now I’m asking you for the last time. Why were you late?” asked the Headmistress.

There was no reply.

“You may go,” said the Headmistress.

Ichibo left but knew that this was not the end of the matter. The Headmistress had said she would take steps - what steps? She did not know. But she knew there was trouble in store.

At lunch time the gang pestered her with questions.

“Why were you late?”

“What did she say?”

“I don’t know what the Headmistress is going to do. But I can’t tell you why I was late,” said Ichibo. “I really can’t.” The gang did not question her further.

Ichibo had not caught the school bus that morning. Instead she had gone to a public bus-stand and had caught a bus that took her to the Corporation Office.

The Corporation building was very old. But it was beautiful with a verandah, a carved wooden staircase and rooms with ceilings more than twenty feet high. Ichibo wondered how they got the cobwebs swept. She was right. They weren't ever swept away except once a year when the building was white washed. The rooms were cool and airy.

Ichibo hung around not knowing where to go or whom to ask about the cutting of the trees. A man noticed the helpless little girl in uniform and asked, "May I help you?"

"Yes. Please. I want, to see, I want to see...the Mayor!" Ichibo knew that every Corporation had a Mayor.

"The Mayor?" asked the man in surprise. "The Mayor is a very busy man. Have you an appointment?"

"No," said Ichibo and her heart sank. She was desperate. "It's important. I have to, I must see him."

"All right, I'll see what I can do for you," said the man.

Ichibo was told the Mayor would see her if she could wait for a few minutes. The Mayor was in a conference with some people. Ichibo was promised the interview because no little girl had ever come to the Corporation office asking to see the Mayor.

Ten minutes later, Ichibo was led into the Mayor's office.

"What do you want, young lady?" asked the Mayor.

Ichibo told him all about the compound next to her school and how the old and beautiful trees in it were going to be cut down so that a building could come up.

"I don't see what we can do about that," said the Mayor.

Ichibo's heart sank and the disappointment showed on her sensitive face. Seeing this the Mayor said, "I'll put you on to the Town Development Officer. Let's see if he can do something for you." The Mayor rang the bell. A peon came in.

"Take her to the T.D.O.," he said.

So Ichibo related the same story to the T.D.O.

"I don't think we can do a thing about this," said the T.D.O. "It's a pity about the trees though. Let's see where this compound is."

The T.D.O. brought out a grid map of the area where the school was located. He located the school and the compound next to it and exclaimed, "It's dereservation land."

"Dereservation? What does dereservation land mean?" asked Ichibo.

As the T.D.O. gazed at the grid map, he became less friendly, almost angry.

"Miss Suchitra," he said, "the land has been sold. There is nothing you can do. Forget the whole thing."

"But you said it is de...dereserved land," protested Ichibo not knowing exactly what that meant.

"I'm very busy. You may go," said the T.D.O.

"But...but...," began Ichibo.

“Off with you or should I ask the peon to see you to the door?” he said gruffly.

Ichibo got up. Her face was as red as a tomato. No one, not even Mrs. Martin, had ever spoken to her like that. As she walked down the corridor, she saw the man with the camera.

“Hallo, there,” he said. “Aren’t you one of the girls who hugged the trees?”

“Yes,” said Ichibo.

“You seemed to be their leader.”

Ichibo didn’t deny it.

“The contractor didn’t come again on Sunday. He didn’t fetch the police. If everything was above board he would have done so,” said the man.

“You think so?” asked Ichibo.

“I smell something fishy,” said the man.

“Me too” said Ichibo. “I met the T.D.O.”

“Did you?” said the man. “I’ve been trying to meet him all morning. What did the T.D.O. say?”

“He was very friendly at first. He got out the grid map and located the place but then he suddenly became serious and wouldn’t talk about the land. At first, he said it was “dereserved” land and that it had been sold. Then he realised he shouldn’t have said that. He was downright rude. He asked me to forget everything and go away.”

“It’s getting fishier and fishier,” said the man. “Government land acquired for a certain purpose and then dereserved and sold to someone to build on? I’m going to find out.”

“Why are you interested in all this?” asked Ichibo.

“I’m an investigative journalist. I am after a story. There may be a scoop in this. I’m working for *The Daily* and I write for the Sunday edition. My name is Ajith. What’s yours?”

“Ichi...Suchitra,” said Ichibo. “Will you find out about the land and do something about it?”

“I will. But in the meanwhile promise me one thing.”

“What is it?” asked Ichibo.

“Don’t talk to anyone about this until I dig out all the facts. If there is a leak, the investigation will be prevented. I’ll work on it quietly until I can establish the case beyond doubt. Then the news story will come out. Will you promise?”

“I promise,” said Ichibo. “I’ll do anything if you can help us save the trees.”

“Good,” said Ajith, “I’ll be seeing you soon. I’ll keep in touch.”

Ichibo walked out of the Corporation Office with a light step. There was some hope that the trees would be saved. She looked at her wrist watch and her heart sank. She would be late for school and there would be a lot of explaining to do.

Ichibo attended school the next day. The first period was geography which no one took seriously. Mrs. Shantha had given the class an assignment. It was a map of India and the class had to fill in the rivers and mountains.

As she traced the river Ganga on the map from its source in the Himalayas to its mouth near the sea, Ichibo wondered what the Headmistress was going to do about her refusal to explain where she had been. Just then the school peon came with the message, "Suchitra is wanted by the Headmistress."

Ichibo got up. Shuck the Duck whispered, "Good luck," and the others watched in silence as Ichibo walked out of the class.

When she entered the Headmistress's room she was in for a surprise. Her father was seated at the table, "So this is it," thought Ichibo, "Couldn't she have just pulled me up without involving my father?"

"Suchitra, I've told your father that you were late to school on Monday. Even he doesn't know why."

Ichibo was silent.

"Answer her, Suchitra," said Ichibo's father.

There was no response.

"I'm sure you have a good reason," said Ichibo's father encouragingly.

"I've promised a friend that I won't talk about it," said Ichibo.

"That's an easy way to get out of the situation, Suchitra," said the Headmistress angrily. "Unless you tell me, I'll have to suspend you from school."

Suchitra's father panicked. He knew that his daughter had probably not done anything wrong. And yet why did she not reply? He also knew that his daughter could be very stubborn especially when she thought she was in the right.

"I'll handle this at home, Mrs. Nair. And I'll get her both to tell you why she was late and to apologise to you," said Ichibo's father.

"I apologise, Mrs. Nair. I do. I'm very, very sorry. But I can't tell you just now why I was late."

Mrs. Nair glared at Ichibo.

Ichibo was silent.

"All right, Mr. Sreenivasan. If Suchitra doesn't come up with a reasonable explanation within a week you can take her away from school."

Ichibo took leave of the Headmistress and ran back to the classroom. Mr. Sreenivasan thanked Mrs. Nair and left.

At lunch time the gang wanted to know what had happened. Ichibo was tight-lipped.

"Tell us," said Shuck the Duck.

"She wanted to know why I was late," said Ichibo. "I didn't tell her why."

"Why didn't you?" said Ani the Bunny.

But Ichibo did not tell the gang the reason for her silence either. Samyuktha wanted to somehow isolate her from the gang for a few minutes. She said, "I'm going to the library. Will you come with me, Ichibo?"

Ichibo had no wish to visit the library. But Samyuktha always accompanied her to the library when she wanted to borrow a book. So she agreed.

As they made their way to the library, Samyuktha asked, "Ichibo, why can't you tell the Headmistress why you were late?"

Ichibo was silent.

"I only want to help you. I know you are in trouble. I don't like to see you like this," said Samyuktha.

Ichibo continued to remain silent.

"Don't worry, Ichibo," said Samyuktha. "We are there to help you should you need us."

Back at home in the evening, while she was sipping her tea, Ichibo's mother asked her whether she was not feeling well.

"You look so dull and preoccupied. What happened at school?"

"Nothing/ said Ichibo.

It -was after dinner that the storm broke out. "You might as well tell me why you were late to school on Monday," said Ichibo's father.

Ichibo didn't answer. Ichibo's mother gazed at both of them in surprise.

"She was. By an hour and a quarter. She went somewhere. The Headmistress sent for me. She wouldn't tell -us where she had gone. And if this silence continues she may be suspended. I'm not going to ask her again," said Ichibo's father as he stormed out of the room.

Ichibo burst into tears. Her mother took her into her arms and comforted her, "Don't worry, little one. Everything will be all right."

"I can't Amma. I can't. I promised not to tell. Not just now. I'm sorry," said Ichibo.

"The Headmistress has given you a week's time," said Ichibo's mother. "You'll have to tell her by then."

That night Ichibo couldn't fall asleep. She felt troubled that she couldn't make her father understand. She saw it from his point of view — she was stubborn and she wouldn't confide in him. He was hurt. She got up from her bed and went to her parents' bedroom. She snuggled up to her father but said nothing. For a few seconds, her father did not respond. Then he stroked her hair and said, "My magpie robin, you are my magpie robin, aren't you? Why don't you confide in me?"

"I hope I'll be able to tell you before the week is up," said Ichibo.

The gang did their best to help her. They joked in front of her, they teased each other but it made no difference. She was withdrawn and at best gave them a weak smile.

In Mrs. Martin's class most of the sums she did were wrong. Mrs. Martin, however, did not scold her. Perhaps she too knew that Ichibo was in some kind of trouble with the Headmistress.

Ichibo usually looked forward to Miss Sheela's class. But even in her class she couldn't pay attention. Miss Sheela was doing the lyric, "Where the bee sucks there suck I." She told them the story of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and about Puck, the mischievous spirit.

"This song is sung by Puck," said Miss Sheela.

As she recited the lines, Miss Sheela noticed that Ichibo was not paying attention. Suchitra seems worried and distracted these days, thought Miss Sheela. She had heard something about Ichibo's being in trouble for being late to school. Was it this that was worrying her?

Suddenly she asked Ichibo. "Do you like this poem, Suchitra?"

Ichibo did not answer. She had not heard a single word. "In which play of Shakespeare do you find this song?" asked Miss Sheela.

Ichibo did not know. She did not answer.

"Come and see me during the break," said Miss Sheela.

Ichibo's heart started beating faster. What was Miss Sheela going to tell her? She couldn't bear the thought of being scolded by her. Would she write a note to her parents?

At lunch that day she hardly ate.

"Here, samosas for you, Ichibo — your favourite", said Samyuktha.

"And here are some chocolates. My uncle has just returned from Switzerland and he brought them for me," said Ani the Bunny.

Ichibo took just one.

"Take one more — they are really yummy", said Ani the Bunpy.

Ichibo refused. "I have to go and meet Miss Sheela," she said and left.

Miss Sheela had just finished her lunch when Ichibo entered the staff-room.

"Ichibo," said Miss Sheela in a kind and gentle voice, "You're in some kind of trouble, aren't you? Tell me."

The contrast between expecting a scolding and kind words was too much for Ichibo. She burst into tears.

She then related all that had happened — how the contractor and his men were to chop down the trees in the next compound, and how she had organised the girls and boys of Standard VI to "hug" the trees.

"You gave me the idea, Miss Sheela. Remember you told us about the Chipko movement?"

Miss Sheela smiled with surprise and amusement.

Ichibo went on to tell her about her visit to the Mayor, her interview with the T.D.O. and her meeting with Ajith, the man with the camera.

“The Headmistress has given me an ultimatum. I must tell her by Monday. If I don’t, I’ll be suspended. I’m hoping Ajith will contact me before that. But if he doesn’t, I don’t know what to do.”

“Don’t worry Ichibo; I’ll see if I can do something. And I won’t tell a soul. So rest assured.”

Ichibo knew that she could trust’ Miss Sheela completely. For the first time since her interview with the Headmistress, she felt much better.

## XV

On Monday morning it was in the papers. “Land scam — Political bigwigs involved?” read the headlines in *The Daily Express*.

The bye-line to the report was C.P. Ajith. The paper carried a photograph of Ichibo arguing with the contractor against a background of children forming a human chain around a tree. The caption to the photograph read — “Chipko Movement by Children.” A special report read — “School Girl Saves Trees.”

The special report stated that Suchitra Sreenivasan and her class mates of Standard VI had heard that all the trees in the compound next to the school were going to be cut. Suchitra had organised a protest and prevented the cutting down of the trees. It was this protest that had led to an investigation of the land scam.

The report said that the land, where a building was supposed to come up, had been acquired by the government about twenty years ago. The concerned land had been reserved for public use. It was to have been convened into a park. Because of political pressure, the land had been “dereserved” and given back to the original owner.

All this had been done in a hush-hush manner.

Investigating this particular land deal, the reporter had discovered that in the last few months many other ‘reserved’ plots had been given away. This was only the tip of the iceberg and many political heads would roll as this issue was now going to be taken up by the Environmental Action Group. This group, made up of concerned citizens, was in no mood to let things be. According to them the city was starved of land and breathing space and they would fight to get all the “dereserved plots” back again for civic use.

Ichibo’s father was always the first to read the paper. He was always up before *The Daily* arrived. With a tumbler full of strong south Indian decoction coffee he would scan the headlines. Reading the paper and sipping the coffee was, according to him, the best part of the day.

But that morning he left his coffee untouched.

“Look at this, just look at this,” he said in utter disbelief.

“What’s the news, bad as usual?” asked Ichibo’s mother.

“Your daughter — she’s on the front page of the paper.”

Whenever he disapproved of Ichibo, he referred to her as his wife's daughter. Both of them read the item "School Girl Saves Trees."

"When, where... when did all this happen...?" stammered Ichibo's mother.

Ichibo's mother went to Ichibo's bedroom and woke her up. She had to shake her thoroughly.

"Wake up, wake up. Your photograph is in the papers," said Ichibo's mother.

For an instance, Ichibo turned over to go to sleep again. The she jumped out of bed and said, "What? Say it again." She bounded down the staircase and saw her father reading the paper. "Show me, show me," she cried.

Ichibo's father gave her the paper. Ichibo looked at the photo and at the headlines eagerly. Then she read about the land scam and about the environmental group that was not going to let the matter rest.

So Ajith had worked hard at the story and had got what he had called the "scoop" of the year.

"Tell us what happened," said Ichibo's father.

She started from the beginning and told them all about the contractor who had brought two men with him to cut down the trees. She told them about her visit to the Mayor and of her promise to Ajith.

"That's why I was late to school," Ichibo said.

"You didn't tell anyone else?" asked Ichibo's mother.

"Only Miss Sheela," said Ichibo.

Ichibo's mother smiled. She knew how much Ichibo adored Miss Sheela.

"You'd better get ready or you are going to be late for school," said Ichibo's mother.

Ichibo's father said, "So, the magpie robin has made headlines in the newspaper. I'm proud of you, Ichibo, and I'm sorry I was harsh on you when you wouldn't tell me why you were late for school."

"Now I can tell the H.M. why I was late," said Ichibo and skipped away to get ready for school.

## XVI

When Ichibo reached school, she went straight to the Headmistress's room.

"Oh, there you are," said Mrs. Nair. "Have you come to tell me why you were late last Monday? But I see your name in the newspapers and I want an explanation for that too."

The Headmistress did not seem angry, only puzzled.

"The two are connected," said Ichibo. But before she had quite finished telling her about the cutting down of the trees in the next compound and of her visit to the Mayor, a team of reporters burst into the room unannounced.

"Is this the little girl who saved the trees?" asked a reporter from *Midweek*

"We would like to interview her," said another reporter.

Mrs. Nair was so surprised she did not know what to say.

“I don’t know what Suchitra’s parents would have to say about this,” said the Headmistress. But the photographers were already clicking away.

Then suddenly Ichibo saw Ajith enter the room.

“Oh Ajith,” said Ichibo, “I’m so glad you’ve come.” She was uneasy and unused to the fuss that was being made of her.

Suchitra introduced Ajith to the Headmistress. Ajith then told the Headmistress about all the events that led to the newspaper story. He praised the courage of the students of Standard VI in facing the tough contractor. He said his story was sure to lead to a political upheaval and the Chief Minister might have to resign.

“I hope this will not affect the school,” said the Headmistress. Being an environmentalist at heart, she sympathised with what Ichibo had done but she was worried all the same.

“Not at all,” said Ajith. Just then the bell rang and Ichibo had to leave. Ichibo shyly entered the class.

Many of the girls and boys had read the papers. The whole class was wild with excitement.

Miss Sheela entered the class and the boys and girls wished her, “Good Morning.”

“I see from the papers that Standard VI has become famous,” said Miss Sheela.

There was total silence at first but soon the boys and girls were grinning.

“Suchitra saw a contractor measuring trees in the next compound,” said Ani the Bunny.

“We met there on Saturday to prevent the cutting down of the trees,” said Amar.

“We made a circle round the trees,” said Gayatri and giggled.

“They couldn’t cut down the trees,” said Shuck the Duck.

Miss Sheela listened to the class with patience, even though she knew the whole story.

“I’m proud of all of you,” said Miss Sheela.

“The credit goes to you, Miss Sheela,” said Ichibo. “You taught us the value of trees when you spoke of Vanamhotsava.”

Miss Sheela was very pleased. It was at times like this that -she felt proud of being a teacher. What a wonderful thing it was to be able to influence young minds to do the right things.

The Headmistress sent a note stating that there would be a special assembly during the last period of the day.

When the school had assembled, the Headmistress spoke about the news item in the papers. She said that Standard VI had done something remarkable.

“If we do not have a huge ugly building next to us, it is due to Standard VI,” said the Headmistress.

There was thunderous applause from all the students and the teachers. Ichibo went home with a light heart.

“What happened at school today - was there a lot of talk about the news item?” asked Ichibo’s mother.

Ichibo became her reticent self.

“Oh nothing much, nothing at all,” she said and went to her room.

## XVII

Exams were approaching as it was nearly the end of the last term before school closed for the summer holidays.

Ichibo was determined to do well in Maths. After her visit to Mrs. Martin’s house, Ichibo’s attitude towards her Maths teacher had changed. She felt she owed it to her to do well.

All week the gang was busy, copying notes, revising lessons, comparing answers.

The day after the exams were over was a free day and the students came to school and did what they liked. Some played games; some sat in groups and chatted. This was the day they most enjoyed.

The gang was in for a surprise. Samyuktha said very casually, “How about spending a week with me at my mother’s estate in Kerala — all of you?”

“A week at an estate,” said Ani the Bunny rolling her eyes in surprise.

“It would be wonderful,” said Ichibo.

“We’d have loads of fun,” said Gayatri the Giggler.

“But will our parents agree?” asked Shruti the Shrew.

“I’ll tell you what,” said Shuck the Duck. “Each of us will tell our parents that all the others have got permission. Then they certainly can’t refuse.”

“Splendid idea!” said Ichibo.

“The estate borders the edge of a forest where elephants are sometimes seen,” said Samyuktha.

“Wow,” said Shruti.

They were all very excited and chatted about how wonderful it would be to go together on a holiday.

Back home, Ichibo told her parents about the proposed holiday.

Ichibo’s father was hesitant. Ichibo’s mother was worried. She didn’t want Ichibo to go away but didn’t know how to refuse.

“The parents of all the others have agreed,” said Ichibo.

“Oh, then we have little say in the matter. We can’t refuse. So you may have your holiday,” said Ichibo’s father.

The same scene was more or less repeated in the other homes. No parent refused.

Samyuktha told her parents that the gang was going with her to the estate. Her mother was a little surprised at first but then said it was a good idea. Samyuktha often felt lonely on the estate. And their station-wagon could after all hold all the five girls.

“But have their parents agreed?” asked Samyuktha’s mother.

“Yes,” said Samyuktha. “All of them are coming.”

The next day there was a hush of excitement in the school. Reports were to be given.

When Ichibo received her report she gasped in surprise. She had an A in Maths!

Later Mrs. Martin called her and said, “I knew you could do well in Maths, Suchitra.”

Soon it was time for goodbyes. School would be shut for summer for the next two months.

“Goodbye Mrs. Martin.”

“Goodbye Mrs. Shantha.”

“Goodbye Miss Sheela.”

“See you in June.”

There were voices heard all over. The girls and boys wished each other goodbye.

But the gang did not. They knew that they would be going on a holiday with Samyuktha to a coffee estate.

End